

## Storytelling and narrative in policymaking

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## Chapter 6: Narrative and storytelling

Vivien Lowndes

### Introduction

Stories are important. Every new piece of legislation, every piece of policy advice or guidance, is a narrative in its own right, which links together beliefs, actions and institutions in a distinctive manner (Bevir and Rhodes 2006: 4). But policy analysis is dominated by ‘decisionism’ (Majone 1989: 19). The emphasis is on finding technical fixes to policy puzzles, with the task of social scientists’ defined in terms of the generation and utilisation of ‘evidence’. This chapter asks whether policy analysis pays enough attention to the role of policy narratives, which deal with ‘why’ as well as ‘how’ questions?

‘Evidence-based policy making’ has become the dominant paradigm (Davies et al 2000). But policymakers quip cynically that ‘policy-based evidence-making’ is more common, with what counts as ‘evidence’ being manipulated to fit pre-determined policy preferences. Some feel that the search for neutral evidence is misplaced anyhow, arguing that policy making should be explicitly a valued-led process. At a workshop for policymakers at our university, one participant argued that: ‘We don’t want *evidence*-based policy making. We want *political* policy-making.’ And another put in a plea for ‘stories not spreadsheets’. Paying more attention to the role of storytelling and narrative can be a way of putting the politics back in to policy-making, and blowing the cover of claims for value-free evidence. It offers new forms of discovery for policymakers, and new opportunities for social scientists to support

better policy-making. A well-connected US political scientist, reflecting on his experience of engaging with policy makers, recently remarked to me that: ‘They don’t want our research findings, they want a model of the mind’.. Supporting policymakers in decision-making can be as much to do with cognitive mapping as with the supply of detailed data. Exploring actual and potential policy narratives provides an opportunity to map and re-map the connections between actors, ideas and institutions. Narratives offer a way to ‘stabilise... assumptions about political dilemmas and come to conclusions about what to do’; they can be defined as a ‘chronological account that helps actors to make sense of and argue about policy issues (Boswell 2013: 621-2). To this extent, stories are prior to evidence. We only know what kind of evidence we need, and how to evaluate it, when we are clear about the policy narrative.

The chapter starts by looking at social science insights regarding the role of narrative in the public policy. I consider why narrative is important and how it can be understood, distinguishing between narrative as knowledge, meaning and metaphor (building on Dodge et al 2005). These understandings are mapped on to three forms of intervention in the policymaking process: mobilising narrative; generating narrative; and contesting narrative. I discuss such interventions in action, focussing on social scientists work with policymakers in city governance. The chapter finishes with a consideration of the future potential of these techniques and a discussion of their limitations.

### **The ubiquity, and utility, of narrative within the policy process**

We can define narrative as ‘a sequence of events, experiences, or actions with a plot that ties together different parts into a meaningful whole’ (Feldman et al 2004). Narrative is explicitly referred to in the political world. Politicians are assessed in the media and by pollsters as to whether they have ‘control of the story’, or are able to establish new narratives. As McBeth et al (2007: 88) put it: ‘Narratives are the lifeblood of politics’. Traditionally in policy analysis, there has been a dismissal or distaste for the role of narratives and stories in policy-making, and a desire to maximise the distance between policy analysis and storytelling. Deborah Stone (writing initially in 1988) observes that the ‘new field of policy science, supposedly devoted to improving governance, was based on a profound disgust for the ambiguities and paradoxes of politics’ (Stone 2011: x). Should we leave narrative to the politicians then? To do so is to replicate the traditional attempt to separate politics and administration. This attempt casts politicians as storytellers, engaged with values and visions, and policymakers as technicians, concerned only with ‘evidence’. Stone (2011: x) claims that this is both incorrect and undesirable. On the first point, she argues that ‘we need to render more visible the political claims underlying what is usually passed off as scientific method’. And on the second, she reminds us that politics is actually a source of creativity; value-laden narratives provide us with a way to ‘help each other see from different perspectives’.

Such an approach does not imply a rejection of the role of evidence in policymaking, or of social scientists in generating and communicating evidence. Rather, a narrative approach puts evidence in its place. As Giandomenico Majone explains, evidence exists only in the context of an argument. There is no evidence without an argument. This may seem like a paradoxical claim, as we normally see an argument as dependent upon evidence, not vice versa. The point can be clarified through a distinction between evidence, data and

information (Majone 1989: 46). *Data* are observations about the world (survey or interview responses, for instance, or temperature readings or pollution levels), and *information* is data that has been organised and categorised (an Nvivo report based on codes, or a statistical regression analysis). *Evidence*, on the other hand, is information that is selected to support a certain point in an argument. If data is raw material, information is a new sort of substance created from that raw material. Evidence is ‘information selected from the available stock and introduced at a specific point in an argument’, with the intention to persuade. Evidence is still important, but can’t be delinked from the narrative within which it is embedded.

If policymakers select and utilise evidence in the context of narrative, the same is true of those who support policymakers, be they professional policy officers or academic social scientists. The policy analyst is not story-free, but rather engages with policymakers through the intersubjective trading of stories. As Majone (1989: 1) argues, we should see the policy analyst as ‘a producer of arguments, capable of distinguishing between good and bad rhetoric, rather than as a “number cruncher”’. Social scientists cannot bracket narrative off, or clean it out of the policymaking process. It is not simply a fluffy extra (the stuff of ‘missions’ and ‘visions’), nor necessarily a suspicious act of ‘spin’ (designed to manipulate); although it can be both of those things. Narrative is constitutive of the policy process. Fritz Mayer (2014) shows how collective action problems are commonly addressed through recourse to storytelling, including the linking of new stories to ‘back stories’. For example, a new policy to devolve (selected) powers from central government to city-regions in England has sought to attach itself to established narratives celebrating ‘the great Northern cities’ of the Victorian era. The intention is to overcome (or ease) the competitive pressures between those individual municipalities being asked to combine into new city-region structures.

There is truth in the adage that human beings are ‘storytelling animals’. Policymakers, and the social scientists who work with them, are no exception. Storytelling can't be avoided, so it should be taken seriously.

### **The limits to rationality: heuristics in the policy process**

Academic research on the role of narrative in public policy abounds, providing a base upon which social scientists can build in developing interventions to support policymakers. Approaches focusing on the meanings that actors attach to their behaviour (and observations of the world) have a long social science pedigree, associated notably with Max Weber's concept of *verstehen* (understanding). Within the discipline of public administration, many of the ‘greats’ were attentive to the limits to rationality within public policy. Charles Lindblom (1959) compared the rational-comprehensive model of decision-making to an approach he termed ‘successive limited comparisons’ (of both means and ends) or, famously, ‘the science of muddling through’. Herbert Simon (1947) had argued that policymakers ‘satisfice’ rather than undertake a fully rational evaluation of the costs and benefits of different options, due both to information insufficiencies and cognitive limitations. Instead they use ‘rules of thumb’ or heuristics, which serve to speed up decision-making processes, aiming not for a scientifically optimal solution for one sufficient to meet immediate goals. Heuristics provide frames or constructs for problem-solving and are expressed in a narrative style. Resonating with ambition of this book, the word heuristic comes from the Greek for ‘discover’. ‘Trial and error’, for example, is one of the most fundamental heuristic in human

decision-making; expressed in a narrative form, it is explained and passed on to others as, 'if you don't succeed at first, try again' or 'learn from your mistakes'. These are more than proverbs; they are actually problem-solving strategies that emerge from the experience of dealing with comparable issues. While heuristics are expressed discursively, they can have very real effects, with a bearing upon the allocation of material resources and differential policy outcomes.

Heuristics offer policymakers opportunities for parsimony and efficiency in decision-making. They also build upon policymakers' own local knowledge and situated meanings (Yanow 2000, Bevir and Rhodes 2006), potentially generating a sense of confidence in, and commitment to, decisions. Rules of thumb are generally shared within a particular setting - a specific locality or a type of policy work or a professional role - reflecting what Herbert Lasswell (1949) called the 'contextual orientation' of public policy. However, they can be grouped into broad categories. For example, a 'consistency heuristic' is where a policymaker seeks to ensure one decision is consistent with another (not perfect, but consistent); an 'educated guess' is where a policymaker draws on what they have observed in the past (rather than undertaking exhaustive research); 'working backwards' is where we imagine a policy problem is solved and then seek to identify those steps that would be need to be taken to reach that point; an 'authority heuristic' is where we follow the position of the person in authority without questioning (as in a military situation) and an 'affect heuristic' is a snap, intuitive judgement.

Research has focused on the use of heuristics in doctors' and patients' judgements (including the differences between them), decision-making within the criminal justice system (from

frontline police officers to judges and juries), and in web design for e-government (e.g. Heath et al 1994, Donker-Kuijer et al 2010). For social scientists working with policymakers, just acknowledging the role of heuristics, rather than trying to trump them with 'science', may be an important contribution. It is also important to evaluate their use critically, analysing whether they continue to be relevant as contexts and policy issues change, and the type of biases they may build in to decision-making. Changing heuristics is likely to be difficult, however, given their status as 'mental shortcuts'. Any intervention requires contributions from anthropology (to underpin the detailed observation of decision-making) and psychology (to model cognitive processes, both old and new), as well as the more obvious social science disciplines associated with public policy.

### **From short-cuts to stories: research on narrative in policymaking**

If the early public administration scholars drew attention to policymakers' use of cognitive short cuts, the subsequent narrative 'turn' saw researchers focussing on full-blown storytelling. 'Policy narratives' are identified, which have a specific setting, a cast of characters (who may reflect archetypes like villains, victims or heroes), a plot (often conforming to well-worn scripts) and a purpose (or dominant normative message) (Hajer 1995). The interest in narrative has led to a range of novel approaches, which include (but are not exhausted by):

- The 'new public administration', which challenged value-free premises and a focus on explanatory approaches, emphasising instead interpretation and critique. Influencing



scholarship for the past 40 years, this broad approach has inspired feminist, post-modern and psychoanalytical contributions to policy research (White 1999; Ospina and Dodge 2005: 147).

- Interpretive policy analysis, which focuses on specific policy artefacts (textual and non-textual), those groups for whom artefacts have meaning, the nature of these meanings, and the points of contrast and contest between different narratives (Yanow 2000: 20). The aim is to better understand the interplay between plural sets of meanings, which are themselves associated with different positions of power (Griggs et al 2014: 17).
- Narrative policy analysis, which (inspired by sociolinguistics) seeks to establish 'meta-narratives' from a comparison of stories, non-stories and counter-stories within a policy field. Meta-narratives are able to encompass major oppositions, providing space for deliberation – as an alternative to seeking consensus (Roe 1994; Hampton 2004: 262).
- Narrative policy framework, which specifies narrative elements and strategies as previously neglected variables within explanatory models of the policy process. This approach seeks to measure the impact of narratives on policy outcomes through empirical investigation and statistical testing (Jones and McBeth 2010; Shanahan et al 2011: 535-6).

Some of this work comes from a positivist perspective, in which narratives are seen as another causal variable to be considered in seeking to explain and/or predict policy outcomes. It is argued that this variable has been neglected, and its inclusion will allow social scientists to construct more realistic and useful models (Shanahan et al 2011: 536). But the narrative turn is more generally associated with research from a post-positivist viewpoint. Here researchers do not attempt to explain policy outcomes, or establish causation, but rather seek to understand better the way in which narratives and storytelling operates within the policy-making process. Rather than quantitative methods and modelling, these researchers develop 'thick descriptions' of narrative in action, using ethnographic methods that aim to situate narratives within their own specific context. Starting with policy actors' own accounts, the researcher is engaged in a process of 'interpreting interpretations', bringing to bear their own social science narratives in this process. In this vein, Mark Bevir and Rod Rhodes' (2006) ethnographic work in Whitehall seeks to explain shifting patterns of governance with reference to underlying 'traditions' (Whig, Conservative and Socialist).

How much have these bodies of research contributed to enhancing policy-making in practice? Bevir and Rhodes (2006: 172) argue that policy analysts are able to put together 'resonant stories' from their ethnographic research, which they can share with policymakers to aid reflection on their decisions and actions. Ospina and Dodge (2005: 152) argue that: 'Research that takes a narrative turn offers a way to heal the theory-practice divide... because it may offer information that rings true to practitioners' experience'. But 'resonating' and 'ringing true' seem rather modest aspirations. And such an approach can be highly irritating to policymakers, in the sense that researchers may be simply telling them the stories that they themselves told those same researchers! Where is the added value? Can we go beyond this? In this chapter I will outline a series of techniques that are grounded in research on

storytelling and narrative, and can underpin new forms of discovery for policymakers and new opportunities for social scientists. But first, I summarise six key reasons why narratives are important in policymaking.

### **Why are narratives important in policymaking?**

First, narratives carry values. They deal with ‘why’ as well as ‘how’ questions. Narratives ‘distil and reflect a particular understanding of social and political relations’ (Feldman et al 2004). Richard Kearney (2001: 153) argues that: ‘Storytelling... is never neutral. Every narrative bears some evaluative charge regarding the events narrated and the actors featured in the narrative’. More specifically, policymaking relies ‘on the successful activation of the cognitive and moral resources of citizens through signals and appeals that educate and remind people of what is “the right thing to do”’ (Offe 2009). Paul Sabatier (1988: 152) also reminds us that public policy rarely operates just ‘through the raw exercise of power’ but has to be ‘convincing’ in terms of the definition of problems and the elaboration of policies. Beyond specific policies, those who promote ‘good governance’ (whether at the national or global level) confront a discursive as much as a technical challenge, as it is narrative that makes possible what Kearney (2001: 150) calls ‘the ethical sharing of a common world’.

Second, narratives reflect or even constitute identities, both individually and collectively, and at different levels of policy-making (from the global to the neighbourhood). Henk Wagenaar (2011: 573) argues that policy narratives have the capacity to ‘create social visions, constitute identities, create publics, and influence individual and group relationships’. For Mishler

(1995), narratives are ‘culturally shared stories’ that ‘provide frames for interpreting collective experiences’. Policymakers may seek to link their agenda to established ‘back stories’ so as to promote their positions as constitutive of shared identities. In management, there is new interest in ‘identity leadership’: rather than considering the personal qualities of a heroic leader, the focus is on the leader’s capacity to share a compelling story with followers, which can mobilise them in pursuit of an organisation’s goals (Haslam et al 2010).

Third, narratives hold the keys to agency. Psychologists refer to narrative as a form of ‘agency training’ (Bruner 2002). If we have the story, we are able to act. Going back to Aristotle’s poetics, Kearney (2001) argues that ‘human existence is in search of a narrative’, a ‘crafted structure’ that makes sense out of the chaos of existence. Stories make possible a ‘shareable world’ and we are both actors within stories and tellers of others. As we saw earlier, scholars of public administration have emphasised the role of heuristics in facilitating action within complex and contested policy spaces. Neuroscience is now able to identify the chemical bases of ‘decision fatigue’ and the value of heuristics in reducing cognitive clutter and enabling action. Narratives enable policymakers to frame problems, selecting in and out evidence, prioritising certain characters, settings and plots, whilst selecting out others. Dominant narratives are, at the same time, contested through interpretation and action. Janet Newman (2005) considers how ‘performing citizens’ may react to governing strategies by fashioning their own narratives and generating new capacities to act. As John Clarke (2004: 158) explains, actors may be ‘called’ but may not necessarily respond, choosing instead to ‘refuse to listen or tune into alternative hailings’.

Fourth, narratives make policy ‘stick’, gain traction and endure. As Majone (1989: 31) puts it, ‘to decide is never enough’. Policies also have to be explained and justified through narrative. And narratives have to be adaptable enough to secure policies over time, including their implementation and adaptation in the context of changing environments. When narratives become institutionalised, they contribute to policy stability over time (but also to path-dependency and its change-hampering effects) (Lowndes and Roberts 2013: 63). The most robust public policy institutions are secured not just through formal rules, nor sets of established practices, but through convincing and frequently rehearsed stories. Such narratives may have an official life as mission or vision statements, or they may be more informal, infusing decision-making and behaviour on the ground, and being told and re-told around the water cooler or in the corridors. Lowndes and Roberts (2013: 70) look at how the National Health Service in the UK is bolstered by the power of story, and how proposals for policy change confront the established narrative (e.g. ‘free at the point of delivery’) and the challenge of crafting new ones (e.g. ‘any willing provider’). Moments of major policy change generally involve the collapse of established narratives (and their associated ideas and values), as in the transition from Keynesianism to monetarism in the 1970s (Hall 1992), or as Mark Blyth (2013) put is ‘the birth of a dangerous idea’ - austerity - in the period following the 2008 global financial crisis.

Fifth, narratives are a power resource. Because they carry values, narratives are never neutral. Whose narrative dominates, or what influence it has in the policy mix, is a significant factor. And what we could call ‘narrative capital’ is unevenly distributed among participants in the policy process – politicians, policy advisers, business and community stakeholders, marginalised groups and individual citizens. These groups have a differential capacity, and opportunity, to devise and narrate compelling stories, and – most significantly –

to get them heard. Policy is ‘multi-storied’ (Hampton 2004), and negotiating between these stories is a deeply political process.

Finally, narrative provides a point of intervention in policy-making. It is a way, literally, of joining the conversation, whether as a social scientist, policy adviser, or stakeholder. Narrative interventions may be about supporting policy design and implementation, or they be about disruption - challenging the values and priorities embedded in dominant narratives, and offering alternatives. We now consider in more detail the forms of discovery that narrative analysis offers to policymakers. A social science approach to narrative can support policymakers in working more explicitly and critically with the discursive resources at their disposal. This chapter explores different forms of intervention designed, respectively, to mobilise, generate and contest policy narratives.

### **Narrative as meaning, metaphor and knowledge**

Typologising the different ways in which narratives operate within public policy enables us to establish a framework for considering interventions. Adapting the work of Dodge et al (2005), we can distinguish between narrative-as-knowledge, narrative-as-meaning and narrative-as-metaphor:

- Narrative-as-knowledge: Here narrative is seen as ‘a way of knowing’. Actors are assumed to ‘think and know through stories’ (Dodge et al 2005: 291). Narratives are

seen as containing knowledge. People use stories to draw knowledge from their socialisation and lived experience. Stories enable practical learning. They offer an opportunity to surface tacit knowledge, which can be shared and also generalised to new situations.

- Narrative-as-meaning: Narrative is seen here as a ‘medium of expression’. People are assumed to be purposeful social agents, who ‘create and use stories to communicate meaning’ (Dodge et al 2005: 291), deploying language and other symbolic resources. As such, narratives are a window on beliefs, revealing actors’ processes of sense-making.
- Narrative-as-metaphor: Narrative is seen here as constitutive, as shaping human beings, rather than simply being used by them. Narrative in some sense ‘stands for’ deeper structures, and provides a way into studying their effects. Narrative is not just a way of knowing but also a way of being. It has ontological as well as epistemological significance. Through narrative, we get a glimpse of deep social structures that are not visible to the ‘naked eye’.

These three approaches can be mapped on to a series of distinctive interventions to support policy-making – through mobilising, generating, and contesting narratives – which are discussed below.

## **Intervention 1: Mobilising narratives**

This intervention draws upon our understanding of *narrative-as-knowledge*. It is about unearthing the narratives in use, and their associated tacit knowledge. In work with Alison Gardner, we have shown how narratives help to explain what we call the ‘austerity puzzle’. Between 2010 and 2015, English local government lost one third of its budget and yet continued to function fairly effectively. Our research has demonstrated the role of narrative as a policy resource with material effects. Studying the impact of the cuts (in the context of rising public demand), we analysed how local government policymakers are working with key ‘traditions’, in the sense defined by Bevir and Rhodes (2006), to make sense of and negotiate the demands of austerity. We have identified five key local government traditions - civic, collectivist, professional, commercial and communitarian - each of which have long historical traditions and are not the property of any one specific political party (for more detail see Gardner and Lowndes 2016). Our research shows how, in responding to austerity, traditions were being mobilised, including latent elements, and were in the process of being modified. These traditions were interpreted in the context of specific local knowledge (Yanow 2000), leading to new hybrid narratives of reform.

In our case study we looked at the emergence of a policy narrative of ‘municipal enterprise’ in which the local council has pursued ‘commercial’ goals (generating additional income) within the context of deeply held ‘collectivist’ traditions. The local authority had been undertaking overnight vehicle maintenance for other councils and private companies, in its garages that were previously closed at night. It had also generated income from investment deals on funds released for an infrastructure project, and was letting unused property and land



on a commercial basis. Through the narrative of municipal enterprise, commercial activities were presented as releasing funds and thus mitigating the effect of cuts on local residents, in keeping with the expectation of a strong local council looking after its residents. Policy leaders referred back to the 1980s story of ‘municipal socialism’ to give more narrative power to their chosen approach (Newman 2014). Another hybrid narrative (combining aspects of collectivism with both communitarianism and commercialism) proved less successful in gaining traction. ‘Community commissioning’ involved establishing market-style contracts with voluntary sector consortia in place of established grant-giving relationships with a wide variety of community organisations. The change has been met with powerful narrative resistance on the part of voluntary bodies and activists who see the new contracts as undermining both the autonomy and effectiveness of community action, and as a ‘cloak’ for making cuts.

When we debated narrative strategies with a wider group of local government policymakers (in a series of local and national workshops), participants engaged enthusiastically with the idea of traditions, which they agreed encapsulated forms of tacit knowledge that could be drawn upon in responding to new policy challenges. They pointed to additional local government traditions, including ‘community representation’ and ‘innovation-resilience’. One participant contrasted traditions with the ‘fads and fashions’ that pass through local government, and another described traditions as being like the writing in a stick of rock, running through everything. The concept of traditions was seen as acknowledging the important role of history in local government (‘looking back does give us ideas’). One participant noted that even when political control changed in their council, policies were formulated within the context of dominant traditions. It was felt that narratives could be a lot more compelling in supporting strategic thinking than what usually passed as evidence.

There was some agreement that constrained resources had actually engendered a turn away from evidence based policy and had put the politics back into policymaking (with a plea for ‘stories not spreadsheets’ from social scientists).

The feeling in the workshops was that practitioners needed more ‘thinking capacity’ to self-consciously review the narratives in play within their policymaking processes, and to selectively mobilise (and combine and adapt) those narratives that contained implicit knowledge and learning from the past. Creativity can be unleashed by critically examining the range of potential policy stories, each of which illuminates new and potentially productive connections between actors, ideas and institutions. Workshop participants saw social scientists as having an important role in facilitating this process: ‘We need a greater understanding of those classes of local government organisations that have been constrained or trapped by traditions and those others that have used traditions to drive change’.

## **Intervention 2: Generating narratives**

This intervention is concerned with *narrative-as-meaning*. In comparison with the previous intervention, it is concerned less with narrative archaeology and more with narrative architecture. Constructing narratives is the focus, rather than unearthing them. We are concerned less with identifying existing tacit knowledge and its future applications, and more with generating new narratives, which allow actors to ‘re-frame’ their situation and unlock new capacities for action - to effect change. Narratives here function as a ‘medium of expression’. This sort of intervention involves social scientists working with policymakers

and practitioners to generate new stories, with due attention to settings, characters and plot. From classical dramaturgy, we can think of such narratives as involving elements of logos (an appeal to logic), ethos (ethics), pathos (emotion) and mythos (recurring and familiar plot lines).

An example of intervening in this way is provided by Marshall Ganz' 'public narrative' approach, which reflects the identity, values and agency aspects of narrative that we discussed above. Constructing new narratives to achieve change is a hallmark of this type of intervention. Ganz worked with Barack Obama in developing his initial campaign for the presidency, drawing on his experience of working with trades unions and social movements. As Ganz (2011) explains:

Public narrative is the art of translating values into action. It is a discursive process through which individuals, communities, and nations learn to make choices, construct identity, and inspire action. Because it engages the 'head' *and* the 'heart', narrative can instruct *and* inspire - teaching us not only why we *should* act, but moving us *to act*.

Through narrative we can articulate the experience of choice in the face of urgent challenge and we can learn to draw on our values to manage the anxiety of agency, as well as its exhilaration.

The approach provides a model for working with policymakers and practitioners, as well as politicians and activists. As social scientists, we have an opportunity to work with policymakers in the explicit authorship of three different sets of stories (paraphrasing Ganz):

- A story of self: The task here is for policymakers to identify their own personal motivations to engage with the particular course of action, whether derived from previous experience or core values. They have to come up with stories about themselves that will enable others to understand them. ‘Choice points’ that they have faced in the past may be important.
- A story of us: The purpose of this story is to identify the values, experiences, or aspirations that policymakers intend to tap into among the constituencies with whom they work (which may be relatively broad or narrow, depending on the context). Policymakers are asked to identify shared stories that could underpin this process.
- A story of now: The object is to identify the urgent challenges they face, and on which policymakers want to inspire action. They have to come up with a vision of successful action, and the choices that it would entail. Policymakers need to identify those with whom they will need to work and specify some initial actions.

The different stories exist in a circular and iterative relationship. We can just as easily start the process by working on the story of now, and then explore stories of self and us within that context. But all three elements need to be in place in order to produce a ‘public narrative’. This is not an approach in which policymakers can hope to remain ‘at a distance’; they need to be open about their personal and emotional investments in the policy task. And, at the same time, social scientists are engaged not in reporting evidence to policymakers but in creating a ‘safe space’ for individual and shared reflection, and in facilitating creative processes. Because the process has affective as well as cognitive dimensions, social

scientists need to employ coaching or even therapeutic skills, reminding us that supporting policymakers is not only a job only for those trained in statistics, modelling or cost-benefit analysis. Indeed, Ganz argues that stories capture and express a particular mood or setting (in the manner of a poem, painting or piece of music), and recommends that participants experiment with presenting their stories in different ways. In the public health case, facilitators employed a cartoonist to draw stories as they emerge, showing visually the links between characters, settings, choices, plot and purpose. Going 'beyond text' is important for social scientists seeking to support policymakers and provoke critical reflection on current practice and alternatives (Beebejaun et al (2013).

According to Ganz, we all need to craft our own 'public narrative' because, if we don't, others will. This threat (or reality) is all too familiar to public policymakers who find themselves pilloried or misunderstood by key stakeholders (including elected politicians, business investors, campaigners, citizens and the media), or faced with the challenge of replacing a story of failure with one of success – not just for good PR but to provide a framework for new forms of action. If negative stories circulate in the public domain about our city, for instance, this is likely to affect inward investment from both the private sector and central government, and will make it harder for the municipality to recruit and retain good staff. It can affect citizens' expectations about public policy, and their own capacity to influence it. Any city, or government department or public service, that has achieved a major 'turnaround' has engaged with the need to undermine bad stories and craft good ones, perhaps with new and surprising messages that confound general expectations.

The importance of generating authentic and compelling stories of place is evident in the current debate on devolution to city regions in England. The think tank New Economics Foundation has used the tag ‘England’s Dreaming’ in a project to compare the different arguments for devolution put forward by central and local government and civil society actors (NEF 2015). Within different city-regions, the extent to which these ‘dreams’ are explored, and a persuasive shared narrative generated, is proving critical to the quality of the ‘devolution deals’ negotiated with central government. Greater Manchester, the pioneer of this round of devolution and recipient of the most extensive new powers, stands out for the clarity, coherence and passion of its ‘story of now’ (vis a vis other localities characterised by local rivalries, artificial boundaries, and fudged bargains between players). The story has been able to mobilise powerful local identities, historical legacies of institutional cooperation, close relationships between political and business elites, and the impressive storytelling abilities of charismatic leaders. This experience stands in contrast to some other localities’ efforts to express a shared vision, which are stymied by local rivalries, artificial boundaries, and fudged bargains between players.

### **Intervention 3: Contesting narratives**

This type of intervention rests on an understanding of *narrative-as-metaphor*. Here policy narratives are seen as standing for something deeper, as reflecting power relations that generally lie beneath the surface of the policymaking process. If our first intervention was about archaeology (surfacing and mobilising narratives), and the second about architecture (generating or constructing narratives), this approach is about demolition. How can we work with policy actors to identify narratives that perpetuate deep-seated inequalities – not just as

linguistic expressions, but as frames that organise in and organise out particular concerns and interests? How can we work with them to disassemble these narratives and imagine new stories that are more inclusive, or even empowering? The demolition envisaged here is not to be conducted with a wrecking ball but through the careful dismantling of dominant narrative infrastructures. (The wrecking ball, however, should be kept in reserve - given the size of the task, its urgency, and the likely resistance to be encountered.)

Social scientists intervening to support the contestation of established policy narratives may find themselves working with service users, community groups, campaigners and ‘street level bureaucrats’ as well as top-table policymakers. There is a long history of activist scholars who have played a major role in contesting (official or unofficial) narratives around, for instance, ‘climate change’ (critiquing the neutral language that fails to name global warming as the issue); the policing of violence against women (challenging stories about women ‘asking for it’ or being complicit with their attackers); and the security case for ‘ethnic profiling’ (unravelling stories about what a ‘suspect community’ looks like). Efforts to shift such narratives do not just help policy ‘catch up’ with wider social change, but can also lead that process of change by framing problems, actors and settings in new ways.

Returning to the Greater Manchester devolution case, we can observe that, despite its official traction, the ‘story of us’ has been met with concern, even anger, by some communities and marginalised groups within the locality. The setting of the story is contested (do smaller towns like Wigan really *feel* part of Manchester?), the actors have been criticised for representing an exclusive elite (the ‘Manchester Men’ from business and politics), and the narrative plot for prioritising technocratic rather than democratic means, and pursuing goals

of economic growth over and above social justice. Narrative analysis reveals that the biases within the Manchester story are present in discourses on devolution in other localities too. Nationwide research on ‘arguments in favour of devolution’ (policy narratives, in effect) has found that 42% focused on achieving economic growth while only 13% linked devolution to strengthening local democracy and citizen engagement. Moreover, only 7% of narratives addressed inequalities in wealth and power. The research concluded that ‘new voices’ were needed to contest and revise the dominant devolution narrative (NEF 2015).

A response to this challenge can be found in the launch by social scientists (with partners) of an ‘Action Research Collective’ for Greater Manchester, which has the aim of ‘re-connecting those who have been disenfranchised and excluded from the search for solutions’. The ARC is facilitating ‘learn and do’ activities (to support innovations in urban governance), live debates, online communities and learning exchange visits (in the UK and internationally). The purpose is to actively stimulate critical reflection among communities and citizens on the dominant narratives of city governance and to ‘organise knowledge better to make positive urban transformations happen that are inclusive and equitable’ ([www.urbantransformations.ox.ac.uk/project/jam-and-justice-co-producing-urban-governance-for-social-innovation/](http://www.urbantransformations.ox.ac.uk/project/jam-and-justice-co-producing-urban-governance-for-social-innovation/)).

In work of this sort, social scientists are operating as narrative provocateurs, providing a framework for contesting the Greater Manchester story and assembling new storylines. In effect, they are unpicking the metaphor, and challenging its assumptions. When social scientists support marginalised groups to formulate ‘stories of self’, and to contest the putative ‘story of us’, they make an intervention that challenges deep-seated power relations.



While outcomes are never guaranteed, a potentially transformative process has been unleashed. Indeed, narrative analysis can itself be a tool for empowerment (Hampton 2004). As Julian Rappaport (1995: 805) explains:

Stories are not a scarce resource, but often the stories of people who are “outsiders” are an ignored or devalued resource. Much of the work of social change... may be about understanding and creating settings where people participate in the discovery, creation, and enhancement of their own community narratives and personal stories.

### **Limitations of the narrative approach**

Having identified possible interventions in the policy process, a consideration of the challenges associated with the narrative approach is needed. Five points are of particular significance.

- The challenge of being taken seriously: This arises from the fact that the narrative approach deviates from the assumptions of mainstream policy analysis, for instance it does not fit criteria of non-falsifiability and may have a limited capacity for generalisation.
- Practical challenges: Working with narrative involves spending a lot of time in the field, working collaboratively with policymakers and practitioners. Such work doesn't

fit the demands of the quick call from the Minister's office for evidence to support a policy position (or options). It is resource as well as time intensive, and also requires skills that are not generally prized in the social scientist's training.

- Ethical issues: The outcomes of narrative work don't simply 'belong' to the policy analyst, having been generated collaboratively. Issues of ethics are brought to the fore, in contrast to the policy analyst's typical relationship with the data they collect and analyse. The academic use of narrative-based policy analysis will have to be negotiated with partners. As we have seen, who 'owns' a story is a highly contentious matter.
- Narrative and power: Narrative capital is unevenly distributed. Narratives are not free-floating, or separated from structures of social and economic inequality. One of the roles of academic interlocutors may be to consider critically whose story is dominating, and what weight is given to different stories within the art (rather than science) of policy judgement.
- Institutional design: Our three forms of intervention all require a subsequent stage of activity in which new or modified narratives are 'fixed', so that they have traction over future policy initiatives. Institutionalising new narratives is tantamount to changing the 'rules of the game' within which policy issues are framed. But institutional change is inevitably a slow process, and one likely to be resisted by those who benefit from the status quo (or pursue alternative new narratives).

## Conclusion

The three forms of intervention are clearly overlapping. *Mobilising narratives* can lead to the articulation of new stories, as traditions are put to work in the service of new objectives. *Generating narratives* is a process that inevitably looks backwards as well as forwards in locating and combining discursive resources from which a ‘story of us’ can be crafted. *Contesting narratives* is a process that is endemic to all narrative encounters. In conclusion, it is important that social scientists pay attention to their own narratives too, whichever techniques from this book we use. Social scientists tell stories too. We are engaged, as Bevir and Rhodes (2006) put it, in the ‘interpretation of interpretations’, bringing to bear in this process our own academic theories and traditions. The social scientist is as much a producer of arguments as the policymakers they study. As Majone (1989: 36) puts it, ‘propaganda is of the essence’. We need to reflect upon our rhetorical and dialectical skills, as well as our technical and scientific accomplishments. And we need to recognise that our performance of narratives is always ‘embodied’, with our own gender, ethnicity and class affecting the way in which our narratives are received and interpreted by others.

Social scientists confront, and are implicated in, a multiplicity of stories within any policy space. The question is whether they engage directly with these stories or ignore or dismiss them. But, even where they seek to make stories invisible beneath a patina of ‘scientific’ policy analysis, they will not succeed in negating their effects. As interlocutors in public policy, social scientists are inevitably engaged in a task of ‘active translation’ (Durose et al 2015), involving the negotiation of values and power. The interventions discussed in this chapter seek to make a virtue out of the story ‘problem’. A narrative perspective reminds us

of the necessarily political character of policy making, and the unsustainability of any clear separation between 'politics' and 'administration'. Such a perspective encourages social scientists to unpick supposedly neutral policy statements in a spirit of scepticism or critique; but it also provides them with new tools for working creatively with policymakers, in 'talking' between (not over) competing values, choices and strategies.

In working with policymakers, we ignore the power of story at our peril. The Greek philosopher, Socrates, observed that 'the un-narrated life is not worth living'. In this chapter I have sought to show that the un-narrated policy is not worth having - and probably wouldn't work either.

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